DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 334 534 CG 023 551

AUTHOR Rauch-Elnekave, Helen
TITLE Teenage Motherhood: Its Relationship to Unidentified Learning Problems.
PUB DATE 17 Aug 91
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (99th, San Francisco, CA, August 16-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Cognitive Development; *Early Parenthood; *Infants; Language Acquisition; Learning Problems; *Mothers; *Pregnancy; Public Policy; Self Esteem

ABSTRACT

This study examined characteristics of a group of adolescent mothers and their infants who participated in an intervention program run by a public health department. The subjects were administered a structured interview and a measure of self-esteem, and efforts were made to obtain their school records from local public schools. The Mental Scale of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development was administered to infants at their 9- and 18-month clinic visits. California Achievement Test results suggested the presence of academic weaknesses in reading and language skills, likely weak enough to have warranted special education services if these deficiencies had been diagnosed while the girls were still in school. No evidence of impaired self-esteem was found. Although contradictory findings regarding the self-esteem of adolescent mothers exists in the literature, this finding may have reflected genuine increases in self-esteem following the birth of their babies. Evaluation of the infants' performances confirmed previous findings that the children of adolescent mothers may be at risk for developmental delays. Although language abilities and social skills appeared to represent relative weaknesses for the infants in this study at all ages, cognitive skills were initially strong before one year and appeared to show some decline with age. The results of this study call into question current federal policy that favors the promotion of sexual abstinence as the primary method for preventing teenage pregnancy. If adolescent motherhood is not an accidental occurrence but in fact reflects a maladaptive response to complex and serious social problems, present federal policies would appear to be misguided. A contributing factor is also held to be the failure of public school systems to deal effectively with these adolescents' academic needs. (LLL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Alfred I. duPont Institute
OF THE NEMOURS FOUNDATION
A CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD
Its Relationship to Unidentified Learning Problems

Helen Rauch-Elnekave, Ph.D.
Division of Psychology

ED334534

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Helen Rauch-Elnekave
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CG023551

Paper presented at the 99th Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, California, August 17, 1991.

1600 Rockland Road • P. O. Box 269 • Wilmington, Delaware 19899 • Telephone (302) 651-4000

TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD
Its Relationship to Unidentified Learning Problems

Helen Rauch-Elnekave, Ph.D.
Division of Psychology
Alfred I. duPont Institute Children's Hospital

This paper describes some characteristics of a group of adolescent mothers and their infants who participated in an intervention program that was run by a local public health department. The results suggest that the high rate of school drop-out associated with adolescent motherhood (Hayes, 1987) may bear significant relationship to undetected and untreated learning problems and that early pregnancy and premature motherhood may represent efforts to experience the success that was denied within the public school system.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of the present study were 64 girls who voluntarily enrolled in a comprehensive health department program for teenage mothers and their infants in a large city in the south. Of the 64 girls, four were Caucasian and 60 were African-American. They were sexually active from a young age, the average age at first intercourse being 13.3 years (range 10 to 16; median 14). Average age at the time of first birth was 15.5 years (range 12.5 to 17; median 15). One girl who gave birth at the age of 12 1/2 had been raped by her mother's boy friend. Less than half of the girls' mothers had been teenage mothers themselves. Although 43% of the fathers frequently participated in the care of their infants, 19% maintained only minimal contact and 38% had none. Half contributed to the support of their child.

Procedure

Girls were administered a structured interview and a measure of self-esteem (Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale) and efforts were made to obtain their school records from local public schools. The Mental Scale of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development was administered to infants at their 9- and 18-month clinic visits, where possible.

Results

Academic Achievement

Of the girls for whom California Achievement Test (CAT) scores were available (N=39), the majority (56%) tested one or more years below grade level in Total Reading and in Total Language (51%). Thirty six per cent scored two or more years below grade level in Total Reading and 38% in Total Language (As CATs had been taken prior to giving birth, the scores do not reflect missed time in school.) Math performance appeared to be less impaired, with 36% scoring one or more years below grade level and 20% scoring two or more years below grade level (Figure 1). This relative strength in math was reflected in the girls' stated preferences for academic subjects. Fully 66% named math as their favorite subject, while 65% said their least favorite subjects were English and/or Social Studies.

Despite an apparently high rate of academic underachievement, only two of the 39 girls had undergone psychoeducational evaluations. Both were receiving special education services. Another, who complained to the author that she was finding her school work too difficult and whose CAT scores had been significantly below grade level for many years, was tested by the author and found to have significantly weak verbal intellectual skills (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised: Verbal IQ=65, Performance IQ=88). When asked why the

girl had not been tested previously, the school counselor replied that no teacher or parent had ever requested an evaluation. (This girl lived with her baby, six younger siblings, and an alcoholic mother in a public housing project.)

Social Acceptability

Becoming pregnant was not a uniformly negative experience for a majority of the girls. When asked how they felt upon learning they were pregnant, fewer than half the girls described it as having been a negative experience (43%), while the majority said they had either been happy to learn they were pregnant (14%) or only ambivalent (38%). (Five per cent could not recall their reaction.) Nor did the majority experience negative reactions from family members. One third of the girls described their families as having been happy about their pregnancy; 25% said their families had been ambivalent; while 40% described family members as having been angry or upset.

Most of the girls came from environments where teenage motherhood was the norm rather than the exception. Three out of four had one or more friends who were pregnant or had already given birth, while 38% said they had four or more friends who were pregnant or already parenting.

Self-Esteem

Evidence of significantly impaired self-esteem was not found. Only one of the girls scored more than one standard deviation below the mean on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (N=37), while 16 girls scored more than one standard deviation above the mean.

Infants' Development

The profile of infants' performance on the Mental Scale of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development using the Kent Scoring Adaptation

(Reuter, Note 1) suggested relative delays in language and social skills (i.e., in contrast to cognitive abilities - Figure 2). The apparent relative strength in the cognitive domain, however, appears to be related to age and reflects the fact that infants under one year of age performed strongly on items comprising this domain (Figure 3). That is, while the performance of only one infant under 12 months of age was one or more months below age expectations, that of seven older infants were delayed.

Discussion

The author was moved to investigate the academic achievement levels of these teenage mothers after being told repeatedly that math was their favorite subject -- an unexpected finding. Although a high incidence of mathematics talent was not found, the generally weak performance of these girls in reading and language skills rendered their mathematics performance a relative strength.

CAT results suggested the presence of academic weaknesses in reading and language skills, likely weak enough to have warranted special education services, had the appropriate psychoeducational evaluations been done. Impaired reading skills characteristically affect other academic areas negatively. Once beyond elementary school, grade-appropriate reading abilities are essential for the mastery of social studies, science, and other subjects. Although the records of many girls reflected significantly delayed CAT scores since the third and fourth grades, only two had been evaluated and found eligible for special education services. The likelihood that many more were learning disabled or cognitively impaired is high.

No evidence of impaired self-esteem was found. Although contradictory findings regarding the self-esteem of adolescent mothers

exists in the literature (e.g., Barth, Schinke, & Maxwell, 1983; Streetman, 1987), this finding may have resulted from the girls' desire to make a good impression or it may have reflected genuine increases in self-esteem following the birth of their babies. As more than three-quarters of these girls had at least one friend who was pregnant or parenting and less than half the girls or their families were upset upon learning of the pregnancy, it would be reasonable to assume that parenthood may have represented a realistic life option for many -- one that provided them with positive regard from their immediate social environments and an opportunity for creative "success," neither of which was likely available to them in school. Most girls took pride in how their infants looked and behaved and in their own mothering ability. Self-esteem measures before and after pregnancy and delivery would, of course, be necessary to confirm such a hypothesis.

Evaluation of infants' performance on the Mental Scale of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development confirm previous findings that the children of adolescent mothers may be at risk for developmental delays (Broman, 1981; Field, Widemayer, Stringer, & Ignatoff, 1980). Although language abilities and social skills appeared to represent relative weaknesses for the infants in this study at all ages, cognitive skills were initially strong before one year and appeared to show some decline with age. This apparent decline, however, may reflect initial advantages in fine-motor development that are characteristic of infants of African ancestry (Geber, 1962). Of particular concern are suggestions of early manifestations of language delays, perhaps reflecting a paucity of verbal stimulation (Coll, Hoffman, & Oh, 1987; Field, 1980; Osofsky & Osofsky, 1970).

Recognizing that the data presented here are essentially

descriptive in nature and await experimental verification, the results nevertheless call into question current federal policy that favors the promotion of sexual abstinence as the primary method for preventing adolescent pregnancy and parenting. This policy, as well as the propensity to use the modifier "unintended" when speaking of adolescent pregnancy, reflects the values of the adult members of the majority culture for whom early out-of-wedlock pregnancy is still regarded as "shameful." If, however, adolescent motherhood is not an accidental occurrence but in fact reflects a maladaptive response to complex and serious social problems, present federal policies would appear to be misguided.

If the girls in this study are representative, many teenage mothers find themselves in social milieux where their situation represents the norm rather than the exception. A large number of girls in the program had wanted to become pregnant, were happy when they learned that they were, and had mothers who were also pleased. (One 14-year-old girl reported that, upon hearing that she was pregnant, her mother promptly went to the telephone to call friends to announce the fact.)

What has contributed to the development of this teenage-mother "subculture?" The results presented here point to a possible contributing factor -- the failure of our public school system. As school represents an important source of positive experiences (academic and social) for many children from otherwise deprived environments, school failure can have particularly negative consequences. Many of the girls in this study had been demonstrating academic delays as early as the third grade, but no effort (except in the two cases mentioned earlier) to assess their difficulties or to ameliorate them was made.

It is fair to assume that many of them characteristically found their academic work difficult and unrewarding. If such frustrations contributed significantly to their becoming adolescent mothers, could they not as well represent a significant contributing factor to teenage mothers dropping out of school prematurely? It would appear that the documented failures of our public school systems need to be brought into discussions regarding how to solve the problem of this country's high rate of adolescent pregnancy and parenthood.

REFERENCE NOTE

Reuter, J., Stancin, T. & Craig, P. (1981). Kent scoring adaptation of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development, First Chance Project, Kent State University.

REFERENCES

Barth, R.P., Schinke, S.P. & Maxwell, J.S. (1983). Psychological correlates of teenage motherhood. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 12, 471-487.

Broman, S. (1981). Seven year outcome of 4,000 children born to teenagers in the United States. In K. Scott, T. Field, & E. Robertson (Eds.), Teenage parents and their offspring. (pp. 195-226). New York: Grune & Stratton.

Coll, C.G., Hoffman, J. & On, W. (1987). The social ecology and early parenting of Caucasian adolescent mothers. Child Development, 58, 955-963.

Field, T. (1980). Interactions of preterm and term infants with their lower middle class teenage and adult mothers. In T. Field, S. Goldberg, D. Stern, & A. Sostek (Eds.), High risk infants and children: Adult and peer interactions (pp. 113-132). New York: Academic Press.

Field, T., Widmayer, S., Stringer, S. & Ignatoff, E. (1980). Teenage, lower-class, Black mothers and their preterm infants: An intervention and developmental follow-up. Child Development, 51, 426-436.

Geber, M. (1962). Longitudinal study of psychomotor development among Baganda children. Proceedings of the XIV Congress of Applied Psychology, 3, 50-60.

Hayes, C. (Ed.) (1967). Risking the future: Adolescent sexuality, pregnancy and childbearing. Washington, D.C.:National Academy Press.

Osofsky, H. & Osofsky, J. (1970). Adolescents as mothers: Results of a program for low-income pregnant teenagers with some emphasis on infants' development. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 40, 825-834.

Streetman, L.G. (1987). Contrasts in the self-esteem of unwed teenage mothers. Adolescence, 22, 459-464.

Figure 1
CAT Scores—
Performance Relative to Grade Expectations
(N=39)

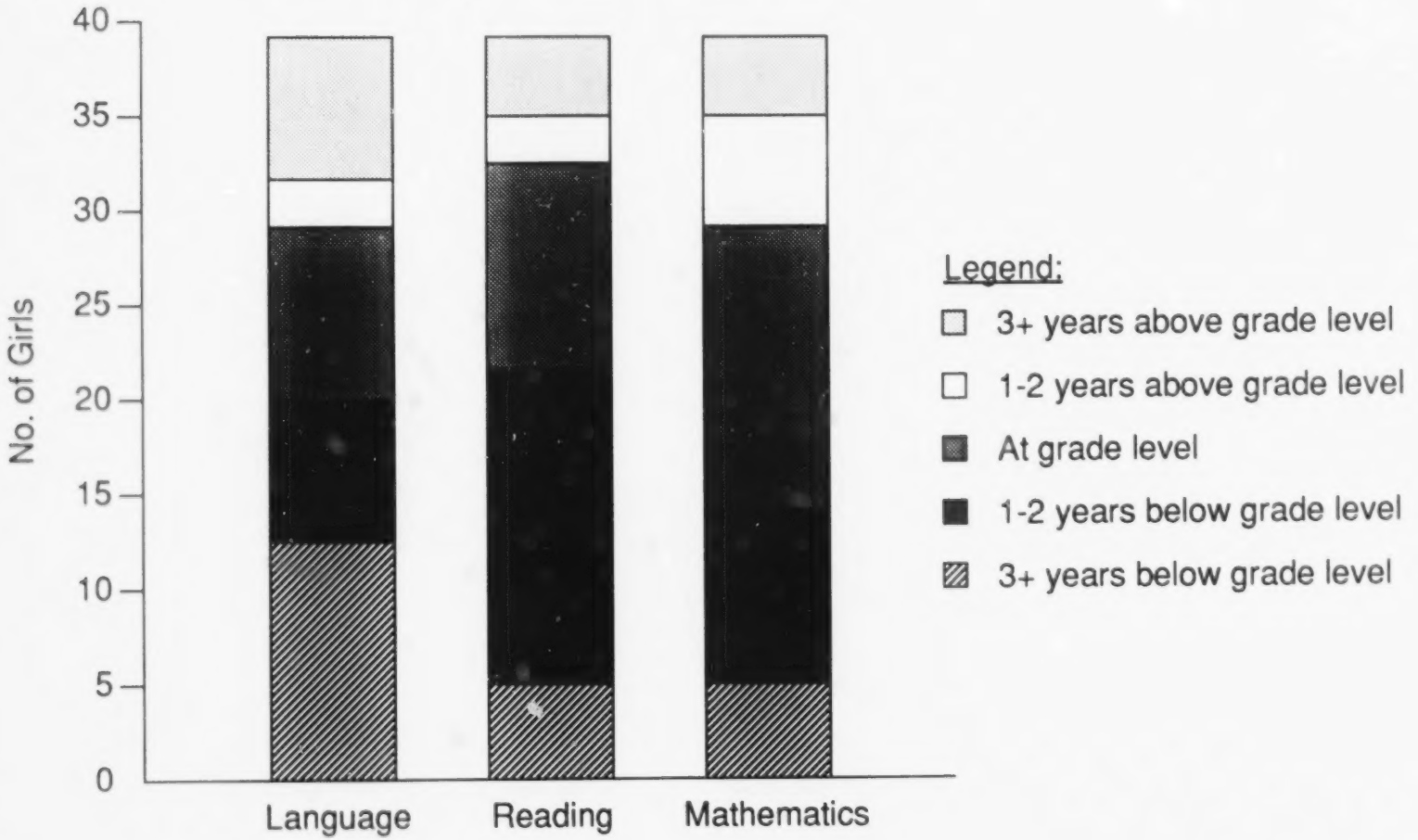

Figure 2
Bayley Mental Scale--
Performance Relative to Age Using Kent Scoring Adaptation for Language, Cognitive, and Social Domains
(N=40)

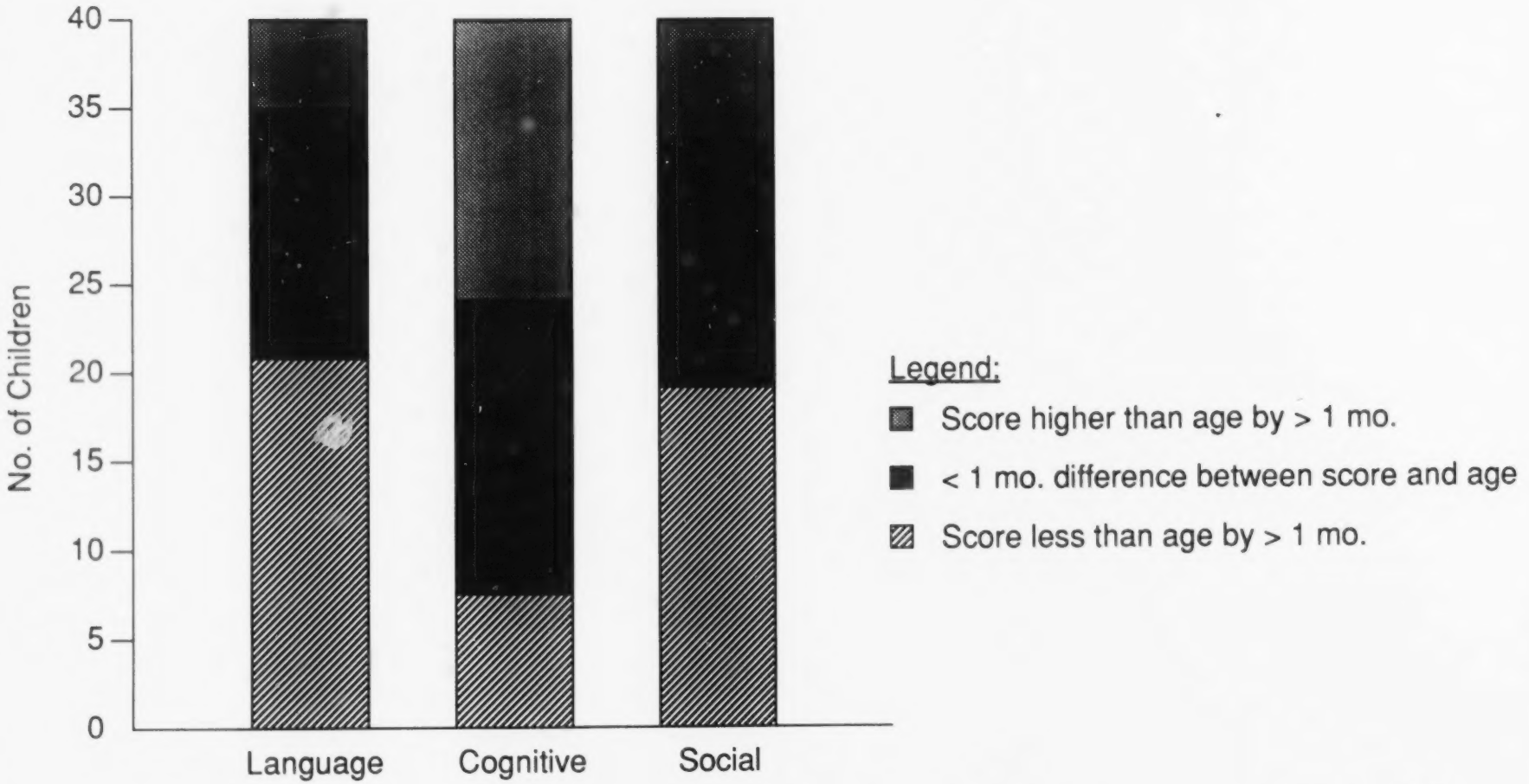

Figure 3
Number of Infants Whose Performance on the Bayley was 1 or More Months Below Chronological Age in 3 Domains (Kent Scoring Adaptation)
N=40

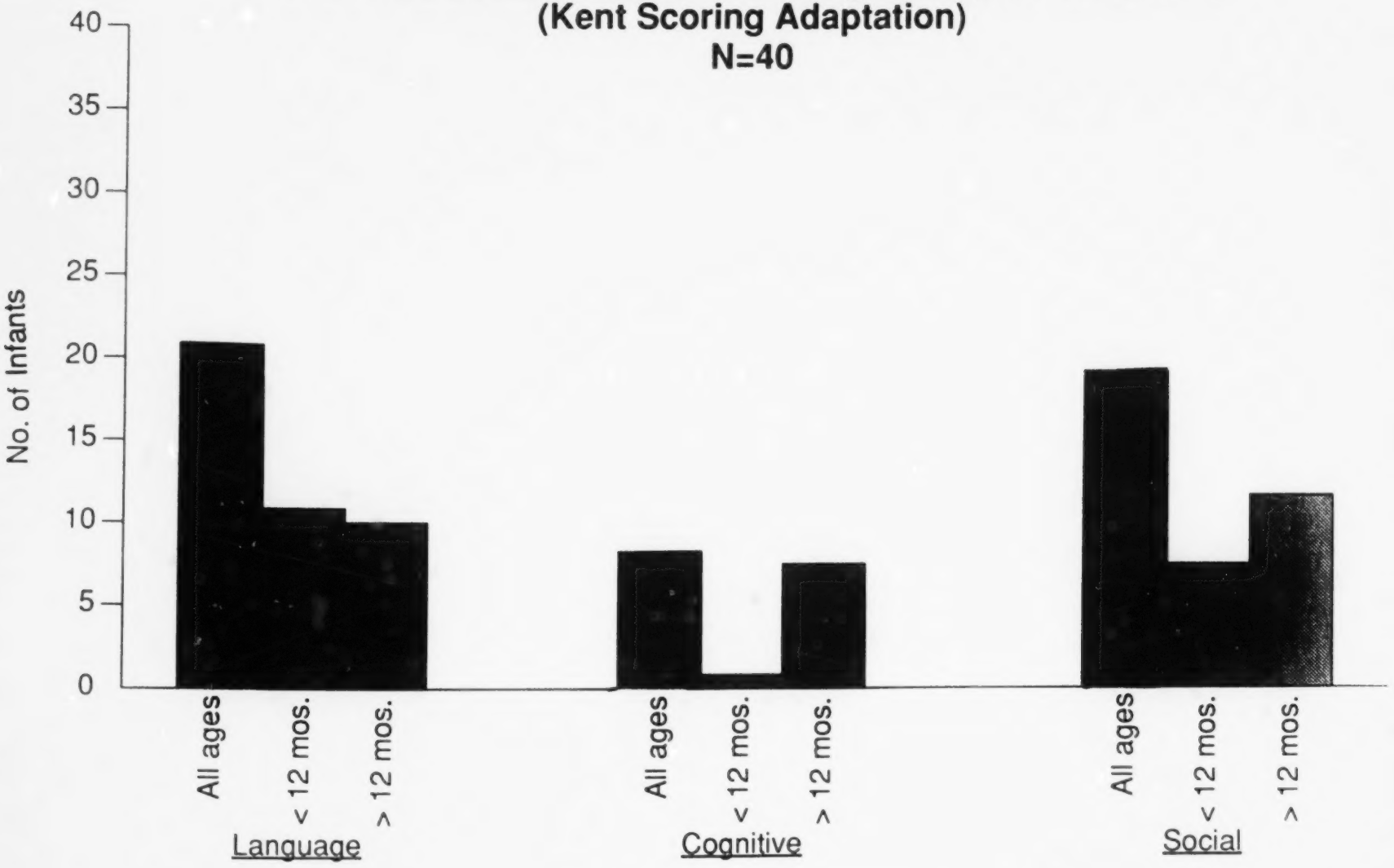

Table 1
Adolescent Mothers' Descriptions of Their Social Environment

	Percent Answering Yes
Angry/upset on learning they were pregnant	43%
Ambivalent feelings on learning they were pregnant	38%
Happy on learning they were pregnant	14%
(Unable to recall feelings on learning they were pregnant	5%)
Family angry/upset about pregnancy	40%
Family ambivalent about pregnancy	25%
Family happy about pregnancy	33%
(Unable to recall family's feelings about pregnancy	2%)
Girls with 1 or more pregnant or parenting friends	75%
Girls with 4 or more pregnant or parenting friends	38%